

in 2002. I'm going to help you with the 13, and when I'm just a citizen, I'll help you with the 36 if you want me to. But we will never have a national Democratic Party that's as strong as it ought to be until we have a majority of the governorships again, and until we can prove, where people live, that we care about them, that we can produce for them, that we reflect their fondest hopes and deepest values. You can do that.

You have helped me to help America. You have immeasurably enriched my life. You've been good to me and Hillary and Al and Tipper. And for all that, I am profoundly grateful. I will treasure this book for the rest of my days and my friendships and, seriously, what Paul Patton said. But America is always about tomorrow. So be proud of what we've done, but keep your eye on tomorrow and lead the American people where we ought to go.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:17 p.m. at Union Station. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Paul E. Patton of Kentucky, chair, Gov. Gray Davis of California, vice chair, B.J. Thornberry, executive director, and Mark Weiner, treasurer, Democratic Governors' Association; Governor Patton's wife, Judi; Governors Frank O'Bannon of Indiana, Pedro Rossello of Puerto Rico, Thomas R. Carper of Delaware, Mel Carnahan of Missouri, James B. Hunt, Jr., of North Carolina, Don Siegelman of Alabama, Roy Barnes of Georgia, Gary Locke of Washington, and Benjamin J. Cayetano of Hawaii; former Governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts; and astronaut Neil Armstrong.

Remarks on Departure for West Palm Beach, Florida, and an Exchange With Reporters

February 29, 2000

Medicare and Tobacco

The President. Good morning. I would like to say just a couple of words about two subjects vital to the health of the American people: Medicare and tobacco.

Throughout the life of this administration Vice President Gore and I have done everything we could to protect our children from the dangers of tobacco. Five years ago, we put forward a landmark rule affirming the

FDA's authority to regulate tobacco products.

Since that time, the tobacco industry has fought our efforts at every turn. I am heartened today by news reports that the Nation's leading cigarette maker is now willing to accept Government regulation of tobacco.

If Philip Morris is ready to support the FDA provisions of the tobacco bill the industry and the Congressional leadership killed just 2 years ago, that is an important step forward.

Every day, 3,000 young people smoke for the first time, and 1,000 of them will die earlier as a result. We have a duty to do everything we can to save and lengthen their lives by protecting our young people from the dangers of tobacco.

I also want to comment briefly about an important new report I am releasing today on the future of Medicare. I am pleased to be joined here today by some of the Nation's foremost leaders on behalf of our senior citizens, along with a number of seniors who know from their personal experiences what Medicare means to their lives.

In the 34 years since it was created, Medicare has eased the suffering and extended the lives of tens of millions of Americans. It has given young families peace of mind knowing they will not have to mortgage their children's future to pay for their parents' health care.

If we want our children to have the same peace of mind when our generation retires, we must act now to strengthen Medicare. When I became President, the Medicare Trust Fund was scheduled to go broke last year, 1999. Because of the tough actions we have taken, the life of the Trust Fund has been extended by 16 years.

Still, we must do more. The Trust Fund is projected to go broke now by 2015, and the new report I am issuing shows why. Not only will the senior population nearly double over the next 25 years, but already today, in 40 of our 50 States, 1 in 10 Medicare beneficiaries is 85 years of age or older. This is the fastest growing group of seniors, and they require the greatest amount of care. And they will spend—consider this—almost a

quarter of their lives on Medicare. The report also shows that in every State in America, there are more women on Medicare than men; on average 57 percent women, 43 percent men.

This report is the most compelling evidence to date that we must strengthen and modernize Medicare for the long run, including adding a voluntary prescription drug benefit. With our economy strong, our budget balanced, our people confident, now is the time to deal with this important issue. The budget I propose does just that while maintaining our surplus and paying down our debt over the next 13 years to make us debt-free for the first time since 1835. It uses the savings from debt reduction to lengthen the life of Social Security and Medicare. It uses competition and the best private sector practices to control costs and improve quality in Medicare. And it provides funds to give every older American, at long last, a choice of affordable coverage for prescription drugs.

These drugs are an indispensable part of modern medicine. No one creating a Medicare program today would think of creating a program without prescription drug coverage. Yet more than three in five Medicare recipients now lack dependable drug coverage which can lengthen and enrich their lives. It's even worse for seniors in rural areas, who have little or no option to purchase private prescription drug coverage. And as today's report shows, nearly a quarter of our Nation's elderly live in rural areas.

Our budget would extend seniors the life-line of optional prescription drug coverage. It creates a reserve fund of \$35 billion to build on this new benefit, and protect those who carry the heavy burden of catastrophic drug costs.

I have been gratified to see the growing bipartisan support for adding prescription drugs to Medicare since I first proposed it last year. But I am concerned, frankly, about two things.

First, some in the congressional majority have talked about providing drug coverage only to the very poorest of our seniors. This report shows that doing so would mean denying a prescription drug option to the nearly half of all seniors who have modest, middle incomes between \$15,000 and \$50,000—the

majority of whom lack dependable drug coverage as well. I think it would be wrong to deny them the opportunity to get that drug coverage.

Second, the majority party in Congress has begun talking again about spending the surplus on huge, risky tax cuts which would make it impossible to pay down our debt. That would leave nothing for extending the life of Social Security and Medicare, nothing for a voluntary drug benefit. I believe that when they read this report they will understand what the consequences of such a decision would be.

The American people have worked hard to turn our economy around and turn our deficits into surpluses. Now, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to both pay down the national debt and to reform Medicare, lengthen the life of Social Security, and add a voluntary prescription drug benefit to the Medicare program. We owe it to the American people to seize this opportunity this year. And I thank all of these fine people who are with me for the contributions they are making to that effort. Thank you.

Middle East Peace Process

Q. Are you throwing in the towel on the Middle East negotiations, and why have you never condemned the bombing of the power plants for civilians in Lebanon?

The President. First of all, I am not throwing in the towel. And Mr. Ross is coming home to consult with me to see where we are. We've made some important headway. We've still got some stumbling blocks there. We're working harder than ever. I'm doing what I think is most likely to succeed this year in securing dramatic advances with the Palestinians and with Syria and with Lebanon. And I'm doing the best I can on it, just as I have been for 7 years.

But it would be a great mistake to overread the significance of his coming home. He's coming home because we need to talk about where we are now and where we're going. But there is no throwing in the towel here.

China

Q. Is the China WTO vote starting to slip away from you? And what are you going to say to the Chinese to get them to stop undermining your message?

The President. Well, no, I don't think it's slipping away. I think the White Paper contains some fairly inflammatory language which caused me, once again, to say that we have had the same policy for 20 years now. We believe in one China, but it has to be resolved peacefully. And we are adamantly opposed to any sort of force.

The White Paper also contains some specific suggestions, however, about how a dialog might be opened. And I understand that this is the political season over there as well. They're having a Presidential election in Taiwan. And I have noticed not only in this election in America but in previous ones, sometimes things are said in political seasons that might not be said at other times. I'm sure you've noticed that as well.

I don't mean to trivialize this. It is very important that everyone understand how strongly the United States views our long-standing policy. We accept one China. We believe there must be cross-strait dialog, and we believe there must be no violence of any kind. But I do not sense that this vote is slipping away.

Oil Prices

Q. Americans today are paying \$1.42 a gallon for gas. That's a pretty good hit at the pump every day when they fill up their tanks. Is there anything that your administration can do to solve that problem, and specifically, is the release of oil from the strategic oil reserves still on the table?

The President. The answer to the second question is yes. We're looking at this oil swap issue. But I think that—as you know, there have been lots of press reports about the prospect that production will be increased and if it is, then the oil prices will go down and the gasoline prices will go down. And that's really what is needed here. And we'll see—I'm encouraged that that might occur. So that's the main thing we can do. But no, I have not taken the petroleum reserve issue off the table. And I certainly wouldn't do that

in the event that we don't seem to have any other options.

Middle East Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, if I could follow up on the Middle East question for a moment. You have a little more than 10 months left in your Presidency, are you prepared to turn this process over? And will you take steps to turn this process over to whoever your successor is?

The President. Well, if we haven't gotten it done I will. But keep in mind, the Israelis and the others—the Palestinians have committed to resolve their issues by the middle of September. That's their common commitment. And neither one of them have given up on that deadline.

And secondly, I think that on the Syrian track, given how hard it was to get it started, and how close, I believe, they are on the substance of it—I don't think there is as much difference there as is commonly assumed—I think it is more likely that we'll have success, if we have it this year, than if we put it off.

But they're not operating on my timetable. They're operating on theirs. And I'm doing what I can to help to get them get the job done as quickly as possible.

Austria

Q. Mr. President, does Haider's resignation really make a difference while the Freedom Party is still in the Austrian Government, and should the international community normalize relations with Austria now?

The President. Well, I think the answer to your question is: I don't know if it makes a difference or not. It might, it might not. The EU has put out a very cautionary statement this morning, and obviously they're closer to it than we are. I think the important thing is that the party reject the kind of intolerance that we fear has been a part of it.

And I think the EU statement is a pretty good capturing of how we all feel right now.

Expulsion of Cuban Diplomat

Q. The Cuban Government continues to insist that the diplomat that was expelled on Saturday had committed no illegal acts. What is your—

The President. Well, my belief is that that matter was handled in the appropriate way, in the way that countries always handle such matters with diplomats. There is no difference in the way we've handled that than the way we've handled many other cases, not just in my administration, but long before. And I don't think I should say more about it than that.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:46 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East Dennis B. Ross; Austria's Freedom Party leader Joerg Haider, who resigned on Feb. 28; and Cuban diplomat Jose Imperatori.

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Luncheon in West Palm Beach, Florida

February 29, 2000

Thank you very much. First of all, Bren, thank you for your wonderful remarks and for opening your home to us today, giving those of us who suffered through an unusually long, cold Washington winter a chance to gaze out on the Atlantic under different circumstances, and for always being there for us.

I also want to thank you for what you have done for the most important U.S. Senate candidate in the country to me. Hillary had a wonderful time here, and I thank you and the rest of you who helped her. I thank you for that.

I'd like to join with Joe Andrew in expressing my appreciation to all the other officers of the Democratic Party and the Florida officials that are here. Congressman Peter Deutsch and Lori flew down with me today. We had a good time, and I was glad to be able to ferry them back home, for a few hours anyway.

I'd like to thank Danny Abraham, Cynthia Friedman, the Carters, all the others who have done this fine work today, and I'd like to put in a special plug for my longtime friend Representative Elaine Bloom who is running for Congress here. She was for me in December of 1991, when only my mother thought I could be elected President.

[*Laughter*] And I am for her in 2000. I'm going to do what I can to help. But I thank you for running for Congress. Thank you.

Let me just say a few words today about this millennial election and about why we're where we are. Eight years ago, when I ran for President, I did so because I thought Washington had become a place that was almost turned in on itself, obsessed with itself, and stuck in the thinking and the debate of a time that was long gone. It was obvious then that we were moving into a global economy, into a global society, that the whole way we work, the way we earn a living, the way we relate to each other and the rest of the world was undergoing a profound change. And yet, in Washington, we just kept repeating over and over and over again the same debates. Each party took the same sides, staked out the same opposite position, paralysis occurred, and the results were not particularly satisfying to the American people.

And so I decided that I would ask the American people to give me a chance to try a different approach, to try to have a politics that would unite and not divide, to try to have a budget policy that would restore basic arithmetic to the American budget and to stop pretending that we could ever get rid of high interest rates and low investment and slow growth until we got rid of the Government deficit, to put the American people first in profound ways so that it would no longer be about Washington but about how people lived out here.

And we've been working at it pretty steady now for 7 years and a month, and the results have been good. We have the longest expansion in history and the lowest unemployment rate and welfare rolls in 30 years, the lowest poverty rates in 20 years, lowest crime rates in 25 years. Adoptions are up. Ninety percent of our kids are immunized for the first time. The college going rate's increased a lot. We've got 150,000 young Americans who are doing community service through the AmeriCorps program, a thousand colleges with their kids out, going into grade schools every week to teach people to read. The country is coming together and moving forward. And that is the good news.

But I think the most interesting thing about this election is, in my judgment, that